

Motoring Rothschilds: Style, speed and sport

Highlighting some of the unexpected resources in the Archive's collections, Justin Cavernelis-Frost looks back to the golden age of the automobile and the enduring passion of some members of the Rothschild family for elegant and fast cars.

Cars have always exerted a strong, seductive power. The skills of the draughtsman, the coach-builder and the engineer have together created objects of beauty, desire and status. Throughout the twentieth century, members of the Rothschild family came under the spell of the automobile. In the early days of automotive history, Rothschilds undertook feats of endurance which influenced developments in car engineering and design. As active participants in the field of motor racing, they succumbed to the thrill and adventure of the race-track. As collectors, the Rothschilds demonstrated the same passion for excellence and craftsmanship in their automobiles as they did in their collections of art and *objets d'art*.

In England, Lionel de Rothschild (1882–1942), eldest son of Leopold de Rothschild (1845–1917), is well-known for his horticultural and photographic interests, but he was also an early pioneer of motoring.¹ Lionel was a founding member of the Royal Automobile Club and he and his brother Anthony were early members of the Cambridge University Automobile Club, which had been founded in 1902.² The Club organised runs, competitive hill climbs and inter-varsity races, for which there was a Rothschild Challenge Cup. Before the First World War Lionel and his chauffeur (and often as not mechanic, navigator and all-round help) Martin Harper, drove Mercedes, Napiers, Wolseleys and Siddeleys across France, Italy, Spain, Germany and North Africa. Many of the cross-channel trips Lionel made were to court Marie Louise Beer, who became his wife in 1912.³ Harper was working in his brother's garage in Cambridge when he first met Lionel, who was an undergraduate of twenty-one, and then driving a 10/12 New Orleans. Whilst at Trinity College, Lionel was summonsed for 'driving a motor car at a greater speed than 12 mph', and fined the sum of £1.⁴

Martin Harper later published his memories of working for Lionel between 1903 and 1914 in *Mr. Lionel: an Edwardian Episode*. He recalls that early motoring was a hazardous undertaking and not for the faint-hearted. Any journey was an adventure and 'to arrive at all was not a foregone conclusion!' Drivers and passengers had to be prepared to carry out quite possibly major repairs on the road. Contemporary maps were impressive-looking affairs, but the roads they showed were often given an appearance equal to the importance of the place they led to; their condition and size could not be judged accordingly and could only be proved by experience. Without the benefit or comfort of windscreens or effective mudguards, dust and mud were constant companions. On their first trip to Rome in 1904, in a forty horse-power Mercedes, Lionel and Harper took many spares, including connecting rods, valves, ignitors, rocker arms, push rods, a spare carburettor and assorted jets, a clutch, extra driving sprockets, driving chains and links, four spare tyres, a loud bulb hooter, indicating the kinds of hazards that could be endured. In addition, they carried a kit of tools 'sufficient to dismantle any part of the car', including tyre pump and repair outfit, vice, soldering iron, blow lamp, copper wire, insulation tape, engine oil, grease, paraffin, emergency petrol, methylated sprits, carbide and gear oil.⁵

At the start of the journey to Rome, with Lionel driving, the car broke down with a stuck valve on the way from London to the coast. Once the Channel had been crossed, in a village

between Calais and Paris Lionel just clipped the side of a donkey cart laden with vegetables, driven by a farmer and his wife, resulting in the street being strewn with produce. Having established that no-one was injured, he apologised handsomely, and asked the farmer to put a price on the damaged goods. A price having been agreed, the farmer's wife began to load the Mercedes with vegetables. This was quickly stopped as Harper disappeared under a mountain of greengrocery. Once it was established that Lionel did not want the goods and was only paying damages, they were sent on their way with blessings for a safe journey. This was the start of many such exciting and hair-raising journeys. Lionel published an account of one of his motoring trips abroad (on this occasion to Spain) in *The Car*, in July 1909. Not everywhere in Spain was ready for the motorist, as Lionel recalled:

Just before Alcala we met an American driving a big Renault. He stopped us and asked if we had any spare petrol as he had lost his way and run short: unfortunately we had none to spare. I told him that perhaps he might buy some in the chemists' shops at Alcala, and that it was all downhill from there to the railway, but I did not tell him about the state of the road, and from what I know of it, if he ran out of petrol on it, he is still there.⁶

Combining his business skills with his great interest in things mechanical, Lionel was elected to the board of The Wolseley Tool & Motor Car Company Ltd in 1906.⁷ Lionel was a keen advocate for Wolseley, buying many of their vehicles, and he and Harper often filed test reports back to the manufacturers from their excursions, on one occasion driving over some of the worst roads in Corsica. Lionel was an adventurous motorist and had many incidents at home as well as abroad, as reported in *The Times* in 1907:

Mr Lionel Nathan de Rothschild is under medical treatment at the Queen's Hotel, Birmingham, for injuries sustained in a motor-car accident at South Yardley on Thursday. His injuries are not of a serious character. They consist of superficial cuts about the face, caused by the goggles which Mr. Rothschild was wearing while driving the car, and which came into violent contact with the head of a horse attached to a milk float.⁸

Lionel's French relations were just as keen as their English cousins to take to the road. In addition to models produced by French marques such as Panhard-Levassor and Delaunay, they owned Rolls-Royces and Mercedes. Records of the family's pre-war motoring are well-preserved in The Rothschild Archive. Invoices and letterheads show the emergence of companies still known today. Edouard de Rothschild (1868–1949) purchased a Kellner in 1906, though as the archives show, in a letter of 5 June 1906, delivery was delayed due to a strike.⁹ Edouard was no less adventurous than Lionel; papers in the Archive relate to charges for speeding brought against him by the Neuilly-sur-Seine police in 1904 and again in 1906.¹⁰ The accounts for Henri de Rothschild (1872–1947) show that he spent over 10,000 francs a month on motoring, over £22,000 today.¹¹ Henri had a particular association with the car manufacturer Société anonyme des automobiles UNIC, and in 1904 provided the finance necessary for UNIC's founder Georges Richard to set up his factory in Puteaux in the western suburbs of Paris to produce two-cylinder and four-cylinder models.¹² UNIC pioneered innovative production techniques and was noted for using components which were interchangeable between its models. UNIC quickly developed a market in vans, and set up the first credit scheme to expand vehicle ownership beyond the wealthy. In 1907 the 12–14hp model was chosen as the London taxi. Henri, later to study medicine, is even credited with providing the design for a UNIC ambulance during the First World War.¹³

The inter-war period was a golden age for the home motor industry with significant growth in the production of both new cars and commercial vehicles. England led the way in luxury coachbuilt motor cars with Jaguar, Lagonda, Rolls-Royce and Armstrong Siddeley producing elegant cars. These latter two marques attracted the attention of Lionel de Rothschild, who



continued to maintain his interest in cars throughout the 1920s and 1930s, owning Wolseleys, Rolls-Royces and Armstrong Siddeleys. The bodywork of the cars he ordered would usually be painted in Rothschild colours, blue with a yellow line. Lionel purchased a Wolseley 16/20 Laundalette in 1919, costing £875, equivalent to just under £30,000 today.¹⁴ Documents in The Rothschild Archive record that the purchase was delayed as a result of difficulties in returning the factory to peacetime production after the First World War. Postwar shortages also caused the price to rise above that advertised in the specification. When he was in London, Lionel lived in Kensington Palace Gardens and spent most weekends at his country estate at Exbury House in Hampshire. In the 1920s, he would frequently drive himself down in his two-seater Rolls-Royce, with the distinctive registration plate 'FLY 5'.¹⁵

Lionel was closely involved with the intriguingly named *Roads Beautifying Association* in the 1930s. The Association was founded in 1928 by Lord Mount Temple, the then Minister of Transport, to provide an organisation through which the voluntary services of horticultural experts were made available to local authorities and others responsible for highway planting and the preservation of trees. Planting advice was also extended to newly expanding industrial

estates and the rehabilitation of slag heaps and other derelict land. This organisation must have held an immediate appeal for Lionel, combining both his passion for horticulture and his interest in cars, and he became chair of the technical sub-committee. The Roads Beautifying Association's annual report for 1936–1937 included photographs of successful and unsuccessful landscaping of roads from around Britain and the world.¹⁶ It also contained some warnings about the deleterious effects of roads and road widening on the English countryside. Published by the Association in 1937, 'The planting of central reserves and roundabouts under the dual carriageway system' gave detailed information about planting schemes and made recommendations for suitable types of plants. A letter from Lionel to the *Hampshire Chronicle* in 1937 expressed the philosophy of the Roads Beautifying Association as being 'to let the poor man have the same pleasure from driving up to his cottage or his house as the rich man can get from his private drive.'¹⁷

Rothschilds on both sides of the continent have had a long association with motor racing and motor events. Martin Harper in his memoirs recalls a race from Paris to Monte Carlo between Lionel de Rothschild and Baron Henri de Rothschild, with both teams driving '60' Mercedes.¹⁸ Henri de Rothschild (1872–1947) sponsored the 'Coupe Rothschild' for the Nice motor race. Between 1901 and 1903 the race was won by Léon Serpollet, and at the race in April 1902 he reached 120.8 kph, breaking the world speed record. His car, a 100hp Serpollet, was nicknamed 'the Easter egg'. Philippe de Rothschild (1902–1988), the son of Baron Henri de Rothschild is famous for developing the family wine estates at Pauillac in the Medoc in the 1930s, but in the 'Roaring Twenties' he was a highly successful racer, under the pseudonym 'Georges Philippe'. Philippe may have been influenced in his love of speed and danger by his older brother James, a military aviator. For one short season he drove Bugatti Grand Prix cars with some notable successes.¹⁹ On one occasion he even drove briefly for the crack Bugatti factory team. In 1928 he came second at the Bugatti Grand Prix at Le Mans in a Bugatti 37, and

Correspondence from Wolseley Motors Limited concerning delays in delivery of Lionel's new car.

RAL XI/15/14

Specification for a Wolseley Landulette, ordered by Lionel de Rothschild in 1919.

RAL XI/15/14

CUSTOMER'S CARE ARE ONLY GIVEN AT CUSTOMER'S RISK AND RESPONSIBILITY.
DRIVERS MUST BE AT LEAST 16 YEARS OF AGE AND BE IN POSSESSION OF A LICENSE, AND MUST BE ACCEPTED BY RESPONSIBILITY FOR ANY DAMAGE TO THIS OR ANY OTHER MOTOR VEHICLE.
 CONTRACTORS TO THE ADMIRALTY & WAR OFFICE.

WOLSELEY MOTORS LIMITED.
 PROMOTED BY VICKERS LIMITED.

WOLSELEY MOTORS

LONDON OFFICE:
 YORK STREET, WESTMINSTER.
 TELEPHONE: AUTUMBERVILLE 2000.
 TELEGRAMS: WOLSELEY 2000.

LONDON OFFICE:
 15, CANNON STREET.
 TELEPHONE: 5555.

HEAD OFFICE:
 ADDERLEY PARK,
 BIRMINGHAM.

BY APPOINTMENT TO
 H.M. QUEEN ALEXANDRA.

July 12th, 1919.

Major Lionel de Rothschild,
 New Court,
 St. John's Lane,
 LONDON, E.C.4.

Dear Sir,

We beg to confirm our telephonic advice of yesterday afternoon to the effect that we are exceedingly sorry your 16/20 h.p. "Wolseley" Landulette cannot possibly be ready until approximately the middle of next month.

We realize that this is considerably later than the date originally suggested for delivery.

Unfortunately, owing to the many difficulties we have encountered in changing over from war to peace work in this factory, all our 16/20 h.p. complete cars are delayed to the extent of several months and we sincerely trust that you will kindly grant us your indulgence in the matter. We on our part would assure you that everything possible is being done to expedite the completion of the car.

We beg to remain,
 Your obedient servants,
 J.G. WOLSELEY MOTORS LTD.

December, 1918

THE "WOLSELEY" LANDAULETTE

PRICES.			
16/20 h.p. (four-cylinder) LANDAULETTE	£875
24/30 h.p. (six-cylinder) LANDAULETTE	£1075
30/40 h.p. (six-cylinder) LANDAULETTE	£1275

For details see specification.

in a Bugatti 35C he competed throughout 1929, coming fourth at the first Monaco Grand Prix, first at the Bourgogne Grand Prix, second at the Grand Prix de Nations held at the Nurburgring, and second at the Saint Sébastien Grand Prix. Driving a Stutz he came fifth at the Le Mans 24 Hours, also in 1929. In his memoirs *Milady Vine*, he claims to have invented the windscreen wiper, as part of some improvements to his sports car to protect the coiffure of a lady friend.²⁰

The Aston Clinton Hill Climb has a special place in Rothschild automotive history. Sir Anthony de Rothschild (1810–1876) had acquired the estate at Aston Clinton in Buckinghamshire in 1851. Aston Hill, on the nearby Tring Park estate of Anthony's nephew, Nathaniel Mayer, First Lord Rothschild (1840–1915) was a renowned motoring venue. Lionel Martin and Robert Bamford were early racers at Aston Clinton, and had set up a small business selling and servicing cars in west London in 1913. Lionel Martin made his first ascent of the hill in a tuned Singer on 4th April, 1914. Bamford's early departure from the partnership left Martin with the need for a new name for his first car, created by fitting a four-cylinder Coventry-Simplex engine to the chassis of a 1908 Isotta-Fraschini.²¹ His success, achieved at the Aston Clinton Hill Climb course in the prototype car, provided the ideal name, and thus the marque of Aston-Martin was born.²²

Other noteworthy cars were owned by members of the Rothschild family. Anthony Gustav de Rothschild (1887–1961) had a passion for exotic luxury automobiles, in addition to being an international banker and breeder of horses. In March of 1934, he ordered a matching set of Hispano-Suizas, a κ-6 for formal occasions and the other, a J-12 for cruising around town.²³ The two cars were ordered through Hispano-Suiza's London agent, J. Smith & Co. Ltd. Both chassis were sent to Howard R. Darrin of Fernandez & Darrin in the United States to receive his most striking bodies. The cars were to be finished in identical colours and complementary styles. These were some of the most expensive cars of the day. The cars were completed in six months and delivered to Anthony at the end of September. The most striking was the Coupe Chauffeur limousine which was built for the long wheelbase (146½ inches) κ-6 chassis. The body featured a teardrop-shaped closed passenger compartment whose raked windscreen matched that of the open chauffeur's compartment. This is believed to have been Anthony's car of choice. On the shorter J-12 chassis, a matching teardrop-shaped four-passenger coupe was built and this was favoured by Anthony's wife, Yvonne. The J-12 was one of the most expensive Hispano-Suiza chassis, costing \$10,150 and featuring a V12 engine similar to the fighter plane engines of the era.²⁴ The J-12 coupe was sold by the Rothschild family to industrialist A. J. McAlpine in 1949 for his personal use. The κ-6 Coupe Chauffeur remained with the Rothschild family until 1984.²⁵

The Rothschild Archive collections in both London and in France contain material relevant to further study of the Rothschilds and their motoring pursuits. Items concerning the English motoring Rothschilds will be found in the Rothschild Archive London, where the papers of Lionel de Rothschild (RAL XI/15 series) will be particularly fruitful (items relating to cars will also be found in the personal papers of other family members). For the continental family, the Moscow papers (RAL 58 series) and the Lafite papers (000/929 series) held at The Rothschild Archive London, together with the personal and family papers of de Rothschild Frères, Paris, held in the custody of the Archives Nationales du Monde du Travail in Roubaix, contain a wealth of information.

The interest of the Rothschilds in all things automotive is enduring and indicative of the diverse range of activities undertaken by members of the family. From the early days of the 'horseless carriage' to the age of the supercharged V12 engine, cars enabled the Rothschilds to indulge their passions for modernity and excitement. Philippe de Rothschild, in *Milady Vine* uniquely expressed his passion, declaring: 'I'm a great driver, a born driver. My buttocks were designed to fit in a driving seat.'²⁶

Justin Cavernelis-Frost has held senior positions with The National Archives and the Museums, Libraries & Archives Council. He joined the staff of The Rothschild Archive in 2009, and was previously Trust Archivist of St Bartholomew's Hospital. He is currently working on a more detailed study of the Rothschilds, their cars, and their automotive exploits.

NOTES

- 1 See *The Colours of Another World*, by Victor Gray, *The Rothschild Archive Annual Review 2005–2006* for an account of Lionel's pioneering use of the autochrome process, an interest that combined his twin loves of photography and horticulture.
- 2 The Cambridge University Automobile Club maintained a club room and a garage for its members at 22A Jesus Lane from 1904–1908. The Club was active until 1910. By 1926 the increasing predominance of car owners prompted a return of the Club, which continues to thrive today. Records of the Club have been deposited with the Cambridge University Archives.
- 3 Marie Louise Eugénie Beer was the daughter of Edmund Beer of Paris. She married Lionel Nathan de Rothschild, son of Leopold de Rothschild and Marie Perugia, on 8 October 1912. She died on 17 May 1975.
- 4 Reported in *The Cambridge News*, June 1902.
- 5 Martin Harper *Mr. Lionel: an Edwardian Episode* (London: Cassell, 1970). p.35.
- 6 Lionel de Rothschild, 'In sunny Spain: a tour from Seville to San Sebastian' published in *The Car*, No 374, 21 July 1909 pp.421–424 (RAL 000/924).
- 7 The origins of Wolseley date back to 1895 when Herbert Austin, then employed as a works manager at the Wolseley Sheep Shearing Company, became interested in engines and automobiles. During the winter of 1896 he made his first car but production did not get under way until 1901, by which time the company had changed hands. Austin managed the new Wolseley company for a short time before resigning to form his own concern, the Austin Motor Company, in 1905. Wolseley continued to expand, over-reaching themselves in 1926 with debts of £2 million. It was purchased by Morris Motors in 1927 and subsequently became part of the British Motor Corporation, later British Leyland. The last Wolseley was produced in 1975 after 80 years. Today, the Wolseley marque is owned by Nanjing Automobile Group. The Wolseley Sheep Shearing Company continues to trade today as Wolseley plc.
- 8 *The Times*, 30 March, 1907.
- 9 The Kellner Coachbuilding Company, founded by George Kellner, began creating custom bodies for carriages in 1861. As a natural progression, Kellner began creating custom coach bodies for automobiles from 1903. Georges Kellner Jr. is credited with being the creator of the 'torpedo' body style. During World War I, the company co-produced SPAD fighter planes. The letter referred to can be found in RAL 58/1/1237.
- 10 RAL 000/929 OC 166.
- 11 RAL 58/1/1237.
- 12 Société anonyme des automobiles UNIC was established in 1906, and quickly established a reputation for cars, trucks and in particular taxis. Passenger car production ceased in 1938, and the company concentrated on commercial vehicles. In 1952, the firm was taken over by Simca. In 1966 it was taken over by Italian Fiat and eventually merged into IVECO (Industrial Vehicle Corporation) in 1975.
- 13 Alan Jenkins, *The Rich Rich* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), p.137.
- 14 Documents relating to the specification and purchase of this model can be found in RAL XI/15/14.
- 15 Ronald Palin, writing in his memoirs in the 1970s recalls 'although FLY 5 was a small Rolls-Royce, it was a big car with a long wheelbase, but Lionel never failed to negotiate the narrow turn from the courtyard into St Swithin's Lane in one go, without reversing, something which few professional drivers seemed able to do.' (Palin, *Rothschild Relish*, London: Cassell, 1970). 'FLY 5' is still in use on Rothschild cars today. Edmund de Rothschild used it on a green Rover 3.5 litre he ordered from the Leyland Motor Corporation in 1970.
- 16 RAL XI/15/90.
- 17 RAL XI/15/90.
- 18 Martin Harper *Mr. Lionel: an Edwardian Episode*, (London: Cassell, 1970). pp.61–66.
- 19 The Bugatti company was established by Ettore Bugatti in Molsheim, near Strasbourg in 1909 and had a tradition of racing throughout its history. The firm dominated the Grand Prix world in the late 1920s and early 1930s and, when it could no longer compete with the Nazi-government funded German teams, it turned to Le Mans and won the French classic in 1937 and 1939. Bugatti died in 1947. The company passed to his son, and was later taken over by the Messier company.
- 20 Philippe de Rothschild & Joan Littlewood, *Milady Vine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984). p.77.
- 21 Aston Martin has produced bespoke sports cars for over 90 years. Lionel Martin's original vision was to build 'a quality car of good performance and appearance; a car for the discerning owner driver with fast touring in mind – designed, developed, engineered and built as an individual.'
- 22 A plaque near Aston Hill, placed by the Aston Martin Owners Club & Aston Martin Lagonda Ltd, commemorates the birth of the Aston Martin.
- 23 Hispano-Suiza was a Spanish luxury automotive and engineering firm, best known for their cars, and world famous aviation engines. The company's origins go back to 1898, when a Spanish artillery captain, Emilio de la Cuadra, started electric automobile production in Barcelona. In Paris, De la Cuadra met the talented Swiss engineer Marc Birkigt and formed an alliance. In 1923 the French subsidiary became an autonomous partnership though not totally independent from the parent company. Today they are part of the French SAFRAN Group, while the Spanish company sold all their automotive assets to Enasa, the maker of Pegaso trucks and sport cars, in 1946.
- 24 Strother MacMinn, 'The de Rothschild Hispano-Suizas', *Automobile Quarterly* Volume 25, Number 4 (New Albany: 1987).
- 25 The cars passed into separate private ownership. In 2004, they were reunited, and displayed at the 54th Annual Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance in California for the Hispano-Suiza anniversary. The cars are today owned by the Robert M Lee Trust.
- 26 Philippe de Rothschild & Joan Littlewood, *Milady Vine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984). p.75.